

International Conference

Preserving Africa's Ancient Manuscripts

Addis Ababa, 17-19 December 2010



Aid Transparency (Dakar, Senegal) / Savama-Dci (Timbuktu, Mali)

Background

Aid Transparency successfully convened in Dakar (20-23 April, 2008) a regional meeting with relevant stakeholders (African librarians, conservators, researchers and decision takers) to prepare a regional Conference on Managing and Analyzing Africa's Ancient Manuscripts. This High Level Contact Group Meeting was attended by some of the most senior public and private managers of manuscripts as well as historians and Islamic scholars. Several important decisions were taken with regard to the setting up of an inter-institutional information exchange mechanism, the venue and date of the conference, the list of participants and specific panels and thematic areas as well as the anticipated publication of a book on ancient manuscripts in Africa.

West Africa is by far the largest reservoir of ancient 7th-19th century manuscripts in the Africa region. Most of these manuscripts are kept in disastrous conditions and need special care in the areas of conservation, microfilming, digitalization, cataloguing and content analysis. There is renewed interest from the part of Africana scholars and culturalists with regard to Africa's written treasures kept in closed family circles, mosques and Islamic centers. The convening of an international conference on the subject matter as well the publication of a landmark book on the conservation and analysis of ancient manuscripts in Africa will play a critical role for setting in motion a larger issue related to the preservation and promotion of Africa's cultural heritage and historical treasures. Until recently, the Timbuktu manuscripts were completely ignored at world level.

Thanks to several stakeholders' interest and The Ford Foundation's pioneering engagement in this field, many of these ancient manuscripts were systematically collected and catalogued while Timbuktu's main public and private libraries were empowered to build capacities in the areas of cataloguing, preservation, translation of Arabic material and restoration.

The International Conference on Preserving Ancient Manuscripts in Africa will bring together African and international senior librarians/information sciences managers, researchers, private and public managers of ancient manuscripts, knowledge industries, decision takers, civil society and international organizations.

This wide array of expertise will set itself the task of analyzing the most salient issues raised by Africa's ancient written treasures and historical records. In addition, it will suggest concrete solutions and set up mechanisms aimed at building professional and financial capacities of private libraries and closed family circles who are the keepers of most of the continent's ancient manuscripts. Several international gatherings have already called the international community's attention on the dismal state of Africa's written ancient manuscripts whether in the East Coast, the Sudanic-Sahelian area, the Chadian basin, the Maghreb in its diversity and a myriad kingdoms and empires scattered throughout one of the largest continents in the world.

Africa is the fountain source of the earliest and most complete types of writing systems and alphabets. It still retains several alphabets including newly created ones. Since the highest antiquity, African Pharaonic Egypt revolutionized humankind's evolution through the most startling inventions including elaborate hieroglyphs at least 5000 years old way before its appearance in other cultural cradles.

Africa's written treasures kept in adverse conditions are at present in great danger of being lost forever if bold action is not undertaken now to preserve ancient manuscripts, offer manuscripts keepers sustainable ways for generating income from their cultural treasures, taking appropriate legal steps to protect this cultural heritage and promote innovative ways for involving private and philanthropic institutions as well as the international community of donors and States.

The rehabilitation of these most endangered world cultural heritage sites and written treasures deserves special attention because they are the repositories of ancient knowledge still vital for an understanding of Africa and world civilization's past, present and future. They represent a key platform for a genuine dialogue of civilizations in a global era dangerously threatened by all kinds of challenges.

Hence, the International Exhibition on Ancient Manuscripts and Writing Systems in Africa will be inaugurated on 17 December 2010 in Addis Ababa. It will take place in the historic halls of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa in close cooperation with Ethiopia's Ministry of Culture, Council of Churches, Islamic Council, Institute of Ethiopian Studies and national museums. African and international cultural heritage institutions as well as multilateral organizations will fully participate in the operationalization of this most comprehensive exposition of Africa's endogenous writing systems and ancient manuscripts (from the highest antiquity to the XIXth century), thus, dispelling the unfair myth that Africa never produced written historical records.

This International Exhibition will be travelling throughout Africa and the world. The following cities will be targeted: Brazil; China; Egypt; France; Ghana; Great Britain; Japan; Liberia; Mali; Mauritania; Nigeria; Sierra Leone; Senegal; and South Africa; United States. The exhibition will cover the following areas: 1/ Evolution of Africa's writing systems (rocks; cave paintings; parchments; scrolls; papyrus; paper); 2/ Presentation of ancient manuscripts from a wide range of African countries dating back – 4 000 years to the XIXth century; 3/ Presentation of relevant original or copied ancient manuscripts, photographs and artifacts; 4/ demonstrations of calligraphic skills by African crafts men and women; 4/ sale of copies of ancient manuscripts and rare books provided by participant private libraries as well as some of the latest books published on Africa's ancient manuscripts and history.

Moreover, African and international networks of librarians, keepers of ancient manuscripts, museums, knowledge industries, think tanks, universities, private sector and African public decision-takers at the highest level will participate in an unprecedented effort to re-assess the fate of Africa's ancient manuscripts, to analyze on a significant scale the content of these ancient written treasures, to empower the private keepers of ancient manuscripts in whose care most of these early written records remain, and to develop sustainable preservation and financial strategies and support systems in order to optimize the life span and utilization of Africa's ancient manuscripts.

Objectives

The objectives of this conference is to: organize an international conference on the status of Africa's Ancient Written Patrimony; publish a landmark book; set up an Africa-regional information exchange and learning network that will also coordinate an Africa-wide training and learning mechanism after the conference; edit, document and disseminate relevant protocols developed for cataloguing, training, interpretation of content and advocating from the initial phase of the work as appropriate, especially, to strengthen the West Africa focus, and to launch a feasibility study for the establishment of an African Training Mechanism for Ancient Manuscripts Conservation.

Thematic Areas and Format

This three-day International Conference will bring together respected scholars, field specialists and practitioners raising central issues and suggesting practical solutions for promoting manuscripts keepers and preserving existing collections. The program will be comprised of three parallel sessions: a/ Research related to ancient manuscripts content and historical significance; b/ Preservation, cataloguing, digitization and restoration issues; c/ Knowledge management and financial capacity building.

The Conference will host 3 keynote lectures and will select a maximum of 15 presentations and 6 session chairs and rapporteurs. During the first day, maximum interaction amongst participants will be encouraged. On Day 2, there will be a Philanthropy Dinner Award honoring best practices on manuscripts preservation and scholarship. A Jury of Peers will select candidates who will be eligible for the Award (a plain bronze sculpture and a check). On the second day rapporteurs will present summaries of discussions and participants will present their amendments and final recommendations during the final plenary session.

Participants will have the opportunity to attend the inauguration of an International Exhibition on Ancient Manuscripts and Writing Systems in Africa at Un-Eca in Addis Ababa. At this exhibition they will be able to interact with African craft men and women specialized in manuscripts copying, calligraphic art, books binding and cultural artifacts. They will also be given an opportunity to visit a few cultural sites in Addis Ababa. Simultaneous interpretation in English, Arabic and French will be available. Also, there will be a maximum of 60 invited participants and perhaps more depending on the availability of financial sponsoring. Invited librarians and speakers from Africa will be sponsored (return tickets, accommodation and food).

Contributors will be asked to send a CV and an abstract of 200 words summarizing salient methodological and analytical approaches. The deadline for abstracts submission is *30 October 2009*. All documents should be sent to the Steering Committee at the following email address: Scommittee@africanmanuscripts.org. Selected authors will be informed and will receive information on the editorial format they will be using. Deadline for papers submission will be *30 March 2010*. Commissioned papers will cover research expenses and honoraria. All papers will be peer-reviewed and published in a book format that will be available prior to the International Conference.

Contacts

Email: Mgmt@africanmanuscripts.org

Postal: P.O. Box 5409 Dakar-Fann, Dakar, Senegal

J. Habib Sy.. Tel.: +221 8203660 (office); + 221 5691682 (cell). Fax: + 221 8203667